

*RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NOTE / NOTE SUR LA
RECHERCHE ET LES MÉTHODES*

NEUTRAL ASSESSMENT OF THE NATIONAL
RESEARCH COUNCIL CANADA EVALUATION
FUNCTION

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Abstract: Federal government departments and agencies are required to conduct a neutral assessment of their evaluation function once every five years under the Treasury Board Secretariat's Policy on Evaluation (2009). This article describes the National Research Council's experience conducting the first neutral assessment of its evaluation function. Based on learning from this first assessment, best practices that NRC intends on replicating, as well as lessons learned for future assessments, are discussed. This article may be of interest to both federal and non-federal organizations seeking to conduct a neutral assessment in an effort to improve their evaluation services and products.

Résumé : Les ministères et les agences du gouvernement fédéral doivent effectuer un examen neutre de leur fonction d'évaluation une fois à tous les cinq ans selon la politique du Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor sur l'évaluation (2009). Cet article décrit l'expérience du Conseil national de recherches du Canada dans le cadre de la réalisation du premier examen neutre de sa fonction d'évaluation. À partir des apprentissages découlant du premier examen,

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les bonnes pratiques ainsi que les leçons apprises que le CNRC entend répliquer dans des exercices futures sont discutées. Cet article pourrait s'avérer d'intérêt pour les organisations fédérales et non-fédérales cherchant à mener un examen neutre dans le but d'améliorer leurs services et produits d'évaluation.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) *Policy on Evaluation* (2009), Canadian federal departments and agencies are required to conduct a neutral assessment of their evaluation function at least once every five years, with the first neutral assessments to be completed by March 31, 2014.

The National Research Council Canada (NRC) was one of the first federal departments/agencies to carry out a neutral assessment of its evaluation function, which was completed in 2012–13. This Practice Note has been prepared to broadly disseminate information on the organization's experience to the evaluation community. The article begins by describing the approach and scope adopted by NRC, followed by a discussion of the methods and data sources used, and the eventual reporting on the assessment. It concludes by discussing the implications for future neutral assessments of the NRC evaluation function.

NRC'S NEUTRAL ASSESSMENT APPROACH

To guide the neutral assessment of NRC's evaluation function, a framework was first developed in 2011–12 by an external consultant. This step was considered quite important, given the flexible approach allowed by the Centre of Excellence for Evaluation for the conduct of the neutral assessment. This flexibility proved to be fortuitous as it provided NRC with the opportunity to refine the approach one year later, just before starting the neutral assessment process. Modifications were based on the identified needs of the organization's senior management and the needs of the evaluation unit at the time of the assessment. The framework developed for the neutral assessment was based on earlier work by the external consultant (Lahey, 2012), where evaluation in the public sector is viewed within a broader "system," resting on four essential building blocks:

1. vision of leadership within the organization;
2. an enabling environment for an evaluation system to develop and function;

3. the capacity to supply evaluation information—the technical capacity to measure performance and provide credible information in a timely way; and
4. the capacity within the system for key users to demand and use evaluation information—key users being managers and the senior officials of the organization.

Inherent in the framework is the recognition of the multiple players within the agency who must be involved in developing an evaluation system for it to be both effective and sustainable. As a *system*, there is a need for a capacity within the organization not only *to do* evaluation (i.e., to supply information on performance), but also a capacity *to use* that information in decision making by managers and senior officials (Lahey, 2010, 2013). In addition, the use of (or demand for) evaluation is dependent upon incentives built within the evaluation system (Lahey, 2010; Mackay, 2007).

The broad and inclusive approach to the neutral assessment suggested by the framework was particularly important because NRC was in the midst of undergoing significant organizational and business changes. The exercise allowed for a good dialogue on issues of capacity and performance over the recent past, as well as expectations for the way ahead. The latter allowed for an identification and discussion with senior management of any “at risk” issues identified during the neutral assessment.

SCOPE OF THE ASSESSMENT

The three areas assessed as part of NRC’s neutral assessment included

1. NRC-wide standards for evaluation (e.g., is there adequate capacity in NRC to carry out evaluation; does the organization adequately support and enable the conduct and use of evaluation?);
2. professional practice standards for individual evaluations (e.g., quality and credibility of evaluations; independence/ neutrality of evaluations); and
3. utilization of evaluation results by NRC management.

The main factors considered within these three areas were consistent with the literature on organizational evaluation capacity (see for example, Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013). Given the organizational

context, the assessment focused on the performance of the evaluation function—at both an organizational level and in the context of individual evaluations—in meeting professional practice standards, as set out in the Standards and Directive of the *Policy on Evaluation* (TBS, 2009). Factors in the *Policy* influencing the “enabling environment” for evaluation were also examined, given their potential impact on performance of the evaluation function (Lahey, 2011). Finally, the use of evaluation and the ability of the function to meet the needs of senior managers in the recent past were also examined and provided the needed opportunity to initiate discussions on how evaluation could be best used in the future.

TIMEFRAME OF THE ASSESSMENT

NRC’s neutral assessment covered the time period between 2008–09 and 2012–13, corresponding roughly to the implementation of the 2009 *Policy on Evaluation*. While the neutral assessment focused on those five years, two distinct time periods were actually considered in the assessment—the actual assessment period of 2008–09 to 2012–13 and a prospective period of 2013–14 and onward. This approach allowed for recommendations to be positioned in light of the changing context at NRC. It also ensured that areas identified as potential future risks for the evaluation function did not affect the retrospective assessment of the function’s performance. It is anticipated that the next neutral assessment of NRC’s evaluation function will begin where the first left off (i.e., 2013–14).

ACHIEVING AN ASSESSMENT THAT IS NEUTRAL

With the aim of achieving an assessment that is neutral, the NRC team decided to adopt the TBS Policy on Evaluation (2009, “Policy Definitions”) definition of neutrality: “an attribute required of the evaluation function and evaluators that is characterized by impartiality in behaviour and process.” Consequently, it would be inappropriate to solely rely on internal evaluators to objectively assess the agency’s own evaluation function, and so an external consultant was hired via a competitive process. The contract was managed by the evaluation manager at NRC. The alternative of having another corporate function at NRC (e.g., corporate policy, strategy and performance measurement, or internal audit) oversee the contractual agreement with the consultant was rejected due to time pressures and reporting structures.

Various safeguards were put in place to ensure that the assessment remained neutral. For instance, the consultant was afforded the right to reject any suggested changes to the neutral assessment report (e.g., findings, recommendations) made by the NRC evaluation unit, particularly if the suggested changes modified the results. Going forward, should the NRC evaluation unit manage its future neutral assessments, it will consider drawing on external peers or experts at certain points during the assessment to further enhance neutrality. This might include having peers or experts review the statement of work for procuring a contractor, the assessment framework, the data collection tools, and/or the final assessment report.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN ASSESSMENT

When planning a neutral assessment of the evaluation function, the time and resources needed for its conduct are important factors to consider. While NRC's neutral assessment was conducted over a two-month period, four months (elapsed time) may be a more appropriate and realistic time frame. Despite hiring an external consultant to conduct the assessment, considerable time was spent by the NRC evaluation staff on the assessment. In total, 14 days of one internal resource were required.

The cost to NRC for the development of its neutral assessment framework as well as the actual conduct of the assessment was \$40,000—that is, approximately \$20,000 for each. It is expected, however, that future neutral assessments would not require a similar effort in terms of developing the assessment framework, and so the overall costs are likely to be lower. Other, perhaps more economic, approaches to conducting the neutral assessment could include having the evaluation unit conduct an internal self-assessment and hiring an external consultant to validate it; this approach has been used by other departments and agencies that have conducted neutral assessments. Moreover, this approach is commonly used by internal audit functions as part of “practice inspections” (TBS Internal Audit Practice Inspection Guidebook, n.d.). On the downside, though, there would be some loss in neutrality and there would be a need for increased internal resources (i.e., to prepare for and conduct the self-assessment). Perhaps more importantly, the self-assessment approach may lessen the possibility of having candid conversations with senior executives about the performance of the evaluation function.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Multiple lines of evidence, from both internal and external sources, were used in the neutral assessment of NRC's evaluation function. These methods and data sources are discussed below.

Interviews

Interviews were held with TBS Centre of Excellence for Evaluation (CEE), NRC senior executives, NRC senior managers representing key corporate functions, and current and former members of the NRC evaluation management team. While all interviews focused on the three broad issues assessed as part of the overall neutral assessment, specific areas unique to each group were also covered. For instance, interviews with NRC senior executives were foundational in obtaining insight on management needs and their view of the role for evaluation within the organization and in support of NRC's new strategy. Holding interviews with NRC's senior executives and senior managers of corporate functions also served another purpose from an evaluation capacity building perspective. More specifically, the opportunity to discuss evaluation as part of the assessment built further awareness of the function and the role that it has played in the past and might play in the future. As research suggests, an increased awareness of benefits facilitates mainstreaming and use of evaluation (Taylor-Ritzler, Suarez-Balcazar, Garcia-Iriarte, Henry, & Balcazar, 2013).

Interviews with members of the current and former NRC evaluation management team as well as senior managers from other corporate functions provided important contextual information and key information on the role of evaluation relative to other corporate functions.

In addition to internal stakeholders, NRC's neutral assessment included an interview with the senior director of the TBS CEE. This consultation was held early in the assessment to better understand the requirements of the neutral assessment and to ensure that NRC's approach was consistent with TBS CEE expectations. An interview was also held with NRC's TBS CEE analyst, who monitors the evaluation capacity and policy implementation of the departments and agencies within the economic sector, to obtain an external perspective on evaluation capacity at NRC.

Although senior managers who have responsibility for some recently evaluated programs were consulted, the neutral assessment of NRC's evaluation function could have benefited from interviews with program managers recently involved in an evaluation of their programs. This particular stakeholder group, representing the evaluand, would have provided a unique perspective on evaluation capacity and utilization. These managers were not consulted for this assessment, due in part to the fact that NRC was in the midst of many organizational changes; however, future neutral assessments of NRC's evaluation function may include additional interviews with these individuals.

Focus group

A focus group was held with NRC evaluation staff and touched on various topics, including the independence/neutrality of the evaluation function, the structure and resourcing of the function, challenges faced by the function in conducting its work, the value added of evaluation for NRC senior management, and ways to improve the effectiveness and the usefulness of the evaluation function.

The focus group was one of the first methods implemented. It provided the consultant conducting the assessment with information on the context for and capacity of the NRC evaluation unit. In addition, it highlighted any potential issues and areas of concern that needed to be explored as part of the neutral assessment. In the same way that program evaluation knowledge creation is more meaningful if informed by program community member perspectives (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012), involvement of the evaluation staff in the neutral assessment contributed to a more meaningful assessment and created internal buy-in for the process. Given the evaluation staff's stake in the assessment and the potential for biased or one-sided information, findings from the focus group were triangulated with findings from other methods. Future neutral assessments of NRC's evaluation function will make use of the staff focus group.

Secondary data review

Secondary data, largely comprising internal documents and external assessments, were reviewed as part of the neutral assessment to provide context and contribute to the assessment of NRC's evaluation function. Documents reviewed covered the neutral assessment time period (2009–10 to 2012–13) and included annual

departmental evaluation plans, reports on the annual state of performance measurement in support of evaluation, evaluation reports, evaluation postmortem reports,¹ and assessments of the evaluation function as part the annual TBS Management Accountability Framework (MAF).

Future neutral assessment of NRC's evaluation function will be able to make use of the results from postevaluation feedback surveys. Following the completion of an evaluation at NRC, the senior executive and senior program manager responsible for the evaluand will be asked for feedback on the evaluation process and product. Although sole reliance on the postevaluation feedback survey would likely limit the neutrality of the assessment, it can be used to supplement primary data in future neutral assessments, assuming it is found to be valid and reliable.

NEUTRAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

A final report containing key findings and recommendations was produced by the consultant. The goal of the final report was to present sufficient yet brief information on the context in which the assessment took place, how the assessment was undertaken, and its results. Table 1 summarizes the issues covered in the neutral assessment report.

The recommendations addressed issues related to evaluation capacity (such as the composition of the evaluation unit); the enabling environment for evaluation within the agency (i.e., availability of performance data in support of evaluation); and future planning and priority-setting to ensure that the evaluation meets the needs of senior officials in an environment of organizational and structural change.

A formal action plan to address the recommendations will be discussed during the 2014–15 departmental evaluation planning meetings, and a follow-up on the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented is expected to occur annually as well as at the time of the next neutral assessment.

The report on the neutral assessment of NRC's evaluation function was shared with NRC's senior executive. This has not only helped raise their awareness of the issues and challenges facing the evalu-

Table 1
Areas Reported in Assessing the Performance of the Evaluation Function

A. Agency-wide standards for evaluation—capacity to carry out evaluation
A1 Governance of evaluation
A2 Resourcing and staffing of evaluation
A3 Management of the evaluation function
A4 Evaluation planning and coverage of NRC programs
B. Professional practice standards for individual evaluations
B1 Protocol requirements for evaluation process – credibility; neutrality/independence; timeliness
B2 Planning and design of individual evaluations
B3 Project management
B4 Evaluation Reporting
C. Utilization of evaluation results
C1 Agency-level requirements and use
C2 Use of results of individual evaluations
C3 Meeting the needs of the president and senior management
D. Elements to support an enabling environment for evaluation
D1 Senior-level support and oversight
D2 Responsibilities of NRC managers—follow-up to evaluations
D3 Availability of performance information to support evaluation

ation function (e.g., resources), but has also become the first step in working toward addressing these challenges.

CONCLUSION

As a result of NRC’s first experience conducting a neutral assessment of its evaluation function, best practices and lessons learned for future assessments were identified. In terms of the assessment approach, NRC’s focus on a broad context for evaluation (the four building blocks) resulted in an examination of the evaluation “system” within NRC. This has yielded both useful and relevant findings and recommendations. Although the decision to assess NRC’s evaluation function over a five-year period was appropriate, in covering such a time period it is essential that the organizational context be taken into account so that changes are considered when assessing performance and generating actionable recommendations.

From a project management point of view, the use of an external consultant to conduct the assessment ensured impartiality as defined by the *Policy on Evaluation*. In future assessments, NRC will also consider involving external peers or experts at various stages in the process to provide additional safeguards to ensure neutrality. Based on what it has learned this time around, NRC plans to conduct future assessments over a four-month period as opposed to two months.

In terms of the assessment methodology, NRC found that interviews with various internal stakeholders resulted in beneficial insights and warrants replication. Likewise, the focus group with the evaluation staff was considered to be a best practice by NRC and will be used in future assessments. Two additional data sources that NRC plans to leverage in subsequent neutral assessments are interviews with program managers who have recently undergone an evaluation and data from post-evaluation feedback surveys collected on a more systematic basis.

Finally, sharing the neutral assessment report with NRC's senior executives was an effective practice to raise their awareness of the issues affecting the evaluation function. It is expected that integration of the best practices and lessons learned discussed throughout this Practice Note will contribute to an increasingly robust assessment of NRC's evaluation function in the future, and ultimately to enhancements of the organization's evaluation services and products.

NOTE

- 1 At the end of each evaluation project, the NRC evaluation unit conducts postmortem analyses to apply an evaluative lens to the evaluation process, to generate individual and shared lessons learned, and to identify best practices and implications for future evaluation work.

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